SF Art Institute 1982

THE POETIC SPIRIT - Philip Lamantia

This class will focus on poetry as a means of revelation, touching on poetic myths, the exaltation of the Marvellous among the romantic poets and culminating with the revolutionary discovery of psychic automatism, source of multifarious branches on the tree of surrealism. Surrealist perspectives will guide discussion of the great precursors, e.g., Poe, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, as well as little-known American poets of inspired and insurgent imagination: Greenberg, Mina Loy, Harry Crosby. [redacted] Parallel currents in the blues, jazz, visual arts & popular culture will be explored along with surrealist word-games: The Exquisite Corpse & The-One-In-The-Other.

Philip Lamantia was a youthful adherent of surrealism during André Breton's residence in the United States. Among his books of poems are Touch of the Marvelous, The Blood of the Air and his most recent, Becoming Visible. He is a co-editor of the new, surrealist-oriented annual, Free Spirits, to be published this year by City Lights.

THE POETIC SPIRIT - Philip Lamantia
Tuesdays, 1-4 PM - Fall, 1982

I: Introduction: 'Poetry Is Elsewhere'
General orientation. Poetic theories of language. Imagination: central sun of freedom & desire. Poetry of primal peoples; current aspirations.

II: 'Magic: Flesh & Blood of Poetry'
Critique: global debasement of language. Poetic action as supreme negation of repressive reality. Hegel's Aesthetic to surrealism.

III: Poetic Surrealism. (introduction)
Mythic thought, revery, oneiricism. Poe's precursive theory: "Between Wakefulness and Sleep".

IV: Transformation of the past
Eruption of the Marvellous in American sources from Colonial & Revolutionary times: /Cotton Mather's Wonders of the Invisible World to Philip Freneau's House of Night.

V: Roots of the future
Pre-romantic precursors: William Collins' "Ode to Fear" and Edward Young's Night Thoughts. The Gothic dimension. William Blake.

VI: Romanticism: the triumph of the poetic marvellous.
Birth of 200 years of revolutionary thought. Vindication of the "rights of the Imagination".

VII: The great precursors of surrealism: Poe, Rimbaud, Lautreamont. The bridge to symbolism & beyond.

VIII: The Twentieth Century
Samuel Greenberg in the U.S. (1893-1917). Dada & analogous currents in America. Mina Loy. Harry Crosby. The Californian super-romantic: Clark Ashton Smith.

IX. Psychic automatism & poetic surrealism
Frederic W.H. Meyers' theory of the subliminal mind. Freud's contribution. Chance. Analogy. Breton's Rising Sign.

X. Collective poetry
Class participation in word-games: The Exquisite Corpse and The One in the Other.

XI. Beyond literature
Blues, movies, comic books, animated cartoons, radio dramas, etc. Paul Garon's Blues and the Poetic Spirit. Surrealism and Its Popular Accomplices.

XII. Surrealism in the English language
David Gascoyne. Breton in the U.S. during World War II. Indigenous formation & groups of the 1960s and 1970s. Readings from contemporary American surrealists.

XIII. Poetic texts from around the world
Examples of surrealist poetry translated from French, Spanish, Arabic.

XIV. Critique of miserabilism
"Existence is elsewhere." The de-alienation of humanity and its language.

XV: New possibilities
Hermenuetics, esoterism, linguistics. Beyond post-modernism. Libertarian utopia. *additions to 1987 & beyond: Return to Nature: 'Nadja' as source of unconscious activity. Poetry of symbols *unconscious activity, etc. (This latter stuff could become 2 theory lectures for half the course - the circle of note since 1982))

Add: new documentary evidence to introduce: New Color Film (Fuji) in Neighborhood (2 lectures & it Surrealist Poetry to Another Level —!

Project:

Each student will be expected to submit original poetic writings and/or a paper on the subject of poetry (e.g., poetry in relation to his/her own interests in the arts.)

Required Reading:

Photocopied texts (some rare) will be distributed during class sessions, including theoretical statements by Benjamin Péret, E.A. Poe and P.B. Shelley and poetic texts by Amerindians, Cotton Mather, Michael Wigglesworth, Samuel Greenberg, Mina Loy and others mentioned in the syllabus.

Assigned Reading:

The following books will be on reserve in the SFAI Library. Poems and other selections from these books will be announced during the course sessions.

Breton, André: What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings.
_____. Young Cherry Trees Protected Against Hares. (poems)
_____. Manifestos of Surrealism.
Carrouges, Michel: André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism.
Free Spirits: Annals of the Insurgent Imagination I (1982).
Garon, Paul: Blues and the Poetic Spirit.
Gascoyne, David: Short Survey of Surrealism.
Lamantia, Philip: Becoming Visible. (poems)
Surrealism and Its Popular Accomplices. Ed. by F. Rosemont.

ON THE ROAD TO SAN ROMANO

Poetry is made in a bed like love
Its rumpled sheets are the dawn of things
Poetry is made in the woods

It has the space it needs
Not this one but the other governed by
The red gunnard's eye
Dew on a horse-tail
The memory of a clouded bottle of Traminer on a silver tray
A high column of tourmaline over the sea
And the road of mental adventure
Rising steeply
One halt and its immediately overgrown

This isn't for shouting over the rooftops
It's wrong to leave the door open
Or to call for witnesses

Banks of fish nests of tomtits
The rails at the approach to a mainline station
The reflections of two riverbanks
The ridges on a loaf of bread
Foam bubbles in a stream
Thesdays of the calendar
Aaron's beard

The act of love and the act of poetry
Are incompatible
With the reading aloud of newspapers

The direction of the sunbeam
The blue gleam that links the axe-strokes of a woodsman
The string of the heart-shaped snare-shaped kite
The rhythmic beat of beavers' tails
The diligence of lightning
The throwing of sugar almonds from the top of old staircases
The avalanche

The room of miracles
No gentlemen it's not the Eighth Room
Nor the haziness of barrack-rooms on Sunday nights

The dance figures performed in transparency over ponds
The shape of a woman's body traced by daggers cast on a wall
The clear whorlings of smoke
The curls of your hair
The curve of Philippino sponge
The writhings of the coral serpent
The encroachment of ivy on ruins
All time lies before it

The poetic embrace like the sexual embrace
While it lasts
Forbids all surveyance of the world's misery

—André BRETON

"Surrealism. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express--verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner--the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, excluding all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.
Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life.

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Secrets of the Art of Surrealist Magic. Supply yourself with writing materials, after having settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the mind's concentration on itself. Attain the most passive or redeptive state of mind possible. Forget your genius, your talents and those of everyone else...Write quickly with no preconceived subject, so quickly that you retain nothing and are not tempted to re-read. The first line will come by itself, since it is true that each second there exists a sentence foreign to our conscious thoughts which asks only to be brought out in to the open. It is somewhat difficult to make a definite statement about the next sentence (or line); no doubt it partakes of our conscious and unconscious activities at the same time, if one admits that the fact of having written the first sentence implies a minimum of perception. Besides, it should matter little to you. Here likes the greatest interest of the surrealist game. Unquestionably, punctuation opposes the absolute continuity of the flow which occupies us, although it seems as necessary as the distribution of knots in a vibrating cord. Continue as long as you can. Trust is the inexhaustible spirit of the whisper. If silence threatens in the least to establish itself you have made a mistake--a mistake, of inattention. Make a break at the too-intelligible line immediately. After the word whose origin seems suspect place any letter, the letter t ,for example, and restore the arbitrary by making this letter the intial of the next word."

Breton: First Surrealist Manifesto

"The image is a pure creation of the mind.
It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.
The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be -- the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.."

Pierre Reverdy (March 1918)